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TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: MOROCCO's GRAPES OF WRATH

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The city of Meknes is the center of Morocco's budding wine business, employing 6,000 people and producing 70 percent of the country's wine. Paradoxically, until early 2009 the city was governed by the Islamist-oriented Party of Justice and Development (PJD). The story of Meknes' wine renaissance is one that illustrates the country's efforts to balance respect for Islamic tradition in a country embracing modernity while simultaneously accommodating a growing conservative movement. End Summary.

Honoring Tradition

¶2. (SBU) Many of Morocco's Islamic scholars consider alcohol production and consumption to be "Haram" or forbidden to Muslims. Mohammed Raouandi of Morocco's High Council of Religious Scholars told Econoff, "While Morocco is a modern country, its people remain largely conservative." In fact, the country's wine consumption is on the decline, according to Mehdi Bouchaara, the deputy general manager at the Celliers of Meknes (CofM), the country's largest wine producer. He further explained, "Moroccans are growing increasingly conservative. Ten years ago during 'Sha'aban', the month before Ramadan in which Muslims prepare their bodies to fast, wine consumption only decreased about 10 percent. In the last two years, however, consumption during that month has dropped 50 percent."

¶3. (SBU) This decline in consumption can be explained in part by views of groups like Morocco's Islamist-oriented Party of Justice and Development (PJD), who perceive Morocco's wineries as a menace to the country. According to the Party's leader in Parliament Mustapha Ramid, "Alcohol is 'Oum al Khabaath' -- the mother of evil." Faced with this perceived threat, the PJD sees itself as fighting to preserve not only Meknes' Islamic identity but also the country's. For example, parliamentarians representing the PJD have called upon the CofM each year demanding that it justify its wine operation, says Bouchaara. The Ministry of Interior has also, albeit more subtly, approached the CofM to encourage a shift in its agricultural production from grapes to olives, confided Bouchaara. To quell the criticism of its nay-sayers, the CofM maintains a low profile to the extent possible. Its offices have no signs and its advertisement is confined to urban centers far away from mosques and education facilities, adds Bouchaara.

Modernity

¶4. (SBU) While conservatism is on the rise, there is a simultaneous countervailing modernist tendency that more readily embraces the lucrative wine industry. The Celliers of Meknes produces 70 percent of Morocco's wine and employs about 6,000 local residents full time and about 1,000 more for the autumn harvest, who are overwhelmingly Muslim. For many of the workers, going to CofM means reconciling their jobs with their religion. "This is not ideal, but the salary

and benefits are unrivaled in this region," says Mohammed, a long time employee of CofM. Moreover, some 100 heads of households employed by CofM, who currently live in shantytowns next to the vineyards, will soon benefit from new housing courtesy of CofM, said Bouchaara.

15. (SBU) As Meknes' largest taxpayer, CofM wields some clout with the Government of Morocco (GOM), enabling it to push its commercial and secular agenda in the midst of rising conservatism. For instance, Bouchaara said that, after some initial government hesitation, the CofM was granted provincial authority to build a luxury hotel in its vineyards that will cater to foreign tourists. The Celliers has accelerated the growth of Meknes' infrastructure, says Bouchaara, pointing out the paved roads and water dissemination projects in the city funded by CofM.

16. (SBU) Even some conservatives acknowledge the economic benefits of the country's wine production. "There is no doubt that Morocco's wine industry is helping the country's economy," admits the former PJD mayor of Meknes Aboubakr Belkoura. Of the 27 million bottles sold by the Celliers of Meknes, only two million are shipped abroad, the remaining 25 million being consumed domestically. "Moroccan society has come to accept socially what it has refused religiously," says Professor Bekocuhi of Hassan II University. "Wine production is not hypocrisy; it is a sign of tolerance," he added.

Comment

17. (SBU) In the context of the country's growing conservatism, the PJD will likely find it useful politically to continue to oppose publicly the country's wine production. Nevertheless, its leadership will have a difficult time ignoring the economic benefits of that production, particularly as the country worries about prominent sectors, such as automobile parts and textiles, being threatened by slowing exports. For now, the health of the country's wine sector and its peaceful coexistence with Islamist-run local governments remains a testament to the tolerance that prevails across most of Moroccan society. End Comment.

Millard